WOOD LARSON

A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE

AUTHORED BY
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A GRANDDAUGHTER

1990

"I am going, O Nokomis
on a long and distant
journey . . ."
--Longfellow

A boy, in his early teen years, was leaving the country of his birth to experience a new life far from his native Norway. The new land -- America -- was beckoning. Did he have the courage to face this challenge?

BACKGROUND

Life already had been difficult. The boy's father had been drowned in a log jamb accident in the fjord at Christiana (Oslo); his mother, left with five children, had remarried.

"Westward the course of
empire takes its way . . ."
Horace Greeley

THE IMMIGRANTS

This boy, together with an aunt, uncle and two older sisters, (Anneta and Fedelia) came to America. The boy's passage cost had been guaranteed by a seven-year indentured servitude, bound out to a farm near Racine, Wisconsin (information contributed by O.W. Larson).

No family records describe his experiences or his life in America up to the time he completed his period of servitude in Wisconsin. Often there was talk of the rough trip across the North Sea and then the Atlantic. Colera broke out among the passengers before many days at sea. Perhaps descendants of Aunt Anneta Larson Best know some details of this.

"CALIFORNIA OR BUST"

On to California - Westward Ho! This boy, now a young man in his early 20's, saw opportunities in a new land. He signed on as a roust-a-bout to the leader of a Wagon Train ready to undertake the Westward Journey. His tasks were to care for the livestock, both the teams and the extra stock that would be replacements when necessary. His blanket roll was all the baggage that he had.

Incredible as it seems, more than 1/4 million people surged westward in about 1 1/2 decades. Now in the closing days of the twentieth century, all that remains to be seen of this great westward migration are rutted wagon tracks. These tracks show clearly across the plains in the undisturbed soils of Nebraska and Wyoming, deserts of Utah and Nevada, the formidable eastern wall of the Sierra Nevada, and the Oregon trail that bypassed the Sierran escarpment by going to the north.

When the young man from Norway reached California he was paid for his services in cattle. He established his cattle ranch on the land near Stockton and began ranching. Then came the historic winter of 1861-62 when 49 inches of rain fell in San Francisco. The Central Valley was a lake 60 miles long, 40 miles wide (See Brewer's Up and Down California). Rain fell almost continually from November to March. All of his cattle were drowned.

ONWARD TO NEVADA

He said "if this is the promised land of California, I want no part of it." He recrossed the Sierra Nevada and settled near Franktown, Nevada in Washoe County between Reno and Carson City. In Little Valley along the Franktown Creek at an elevation of 6500 - 7000 feet, its forest of virgin trees were being cut. Dahl's mills were logging and processing lumber to supply the mines in Virginia City. The lumber was used to shore up the mine shafts. The young Norwegian went to work in one of the 12 mills operating there.

He seemed to have worked as a logger, felling the conifers for the mills. I can only guess at the name changes, but it was here as the results of his activities that he became known as "Wood" Larson. He dropped the Norwegian spelling of his surname and thereafter was known as Wood Larson. Three subsequent descendants have carried his name. In 1863 he became an American citizen by naturalization.

In Franktown he met his future wife, Mary Jane Owens. She was desperately in love with him, but her father, Judge Elias Owens, forbade the marriage. In December, 1868, these two young people eloped. They drove by horse and buggy to Reno for a marriage license. The Virginia Street bridge across the Truckee River was washed out. They tied the horse to a tree and walked the ties of the railroad bridge across the Truckee. They returned with the license and were married in Franktown. When they arrived at her home, Wood said, "Good evening, father," and Elias Owens said "Good evening, son." There were no hard words.

Mary Jane was 20 years old and Wood, who was much older, always called her "Janey." After he had been dead for more than 20 years she, with the love light sparkling in her eyes, said to me "I'd have married him if he had had only one shirt to his back."

In 1868 after their marriage, Wood and Janey came down to Antelope Valley and began to acquire property with water rights on the West Walker River. Their first two children were born north of Coleville in the farmhouse of Radley from whom they had rented. Later they moved south of Coleville to what is now known as Larson Way, and lived there in a two story house that was built of lumber from the Ash-Bordman mill on Mill Creek.

Wood Larson kept expanding his acreage until he had a 1/2 section (320 acres). They farmed and ran a dairy, the products of which were taken by wagonloads to Bodie in the heyday of Bodie's high population.

From 1863 - 65 he placed his sister, Anneta Larson Best and her husband as foreman on his property. Anneta had married John Best in Iowa before migrating west. He was a difficult man. Finally the Bests and their large family left Mono County and went to the San Joaquin Valley near Modesto where their 12th child, Carrie, was born. Later they moved to Oregon near Lakeview. Best was not kind to Anneta. Someone asked why she did not leave him. She replied, "Well, I married him for better or worse and it has been worse, but I'll stick to my bargain." Later she did leave him and then lived with one of her daughters in Lakeview. She died

at the age of 89 in Oregon in 1918. From Norway to Oregon she had had a life full of rich experiences.

WOOD LARSON, THE MAN

Now what were the character traits of Wood Larson? The following is taken from a letter sent to the author and written in 1964 by the eldest grandchild of Wood and Janey Larson -- Elmer G. Wiley. This together with written notes left by Wood's second son, Victor, give the only description of Wood himself that the family has.

A Few Random Notes Regarding Wood Larson As I Remember Him.
by Elmer G. Wiley, 1964
(Written in a letter to Enid A. Larson)

His father's name was Lars, he told me, who was killed by some log jam in a fjord in Norway. At the age of 13 he shipped to this country and went to Wisconsin. He later got to California and then over the Sierra mountains to Antelope Valley. He told me of the trip over the mountains where there were no roads, and they let the wagons down the hillsides by snubbing them with ropes to the trees as they came down.

He was a raw-boned Norseman, wiry and active, about 5'11" tall -- weight I would say about 170 pounds; a frugal, hard working man with thickly callused hands. He was not stingy, but kind and generous to all.

There was a smoke-house where the pork products from the pigs he raised were cured. A granary with bins of barley and wheat were neatly stored, also dried beans which he raised. One of my jobs was turning the crank on a big machine that threshed the beans out of the dried pods, and operated a fan which blew all the chaff away. It turned hard, and I was pretty lazy, but he was patient with me.

Then there was a stand of bees - about 12 to 18 hives all on a platform and under a good roof with the sides open. There were several apple trees on the ranch, and fields of alfalfa, cattle and horses and milk cows. All in all, the ranch was operated as a self-sufficient unit, as near as he could make it so.

He was partly bald, and what hair he had - plus his full beard, was gray. It was not a thick heavy beard, and he kept it trimmed for it never was longer than about 3 inches below his chin. He was stooped shouldered from years of hard

work, I am sure. There were enlarged pictures of him and Grandmother Larson on easels in the parlor at Antelope (I wonder what became of them?)

He was a very religious man, but not argumentative or intolerant. Grandmother Larson was the one who believed in hell-fire and damnation. During one period in school, our class was reading the tales of the Greek, Roman and Norse mythology. She disapproved vehemently, as she didn't believe that children should be allowed to even think of all those gods, and that it was plain idolatry. Grandfather never said a word. Maybe he was thinking of the Norse story of Thor.

One time the young folks drove away and there was just the two of them and me left, and Grandma took him to task abut it. A new hall had just been built at Coleville, and the young folk were going to that den of iniquity to a dance! MERCIFUL HEAVENS -- HOW AWFUL! Grandpa admitted that he had sanctioned their going and said "I gave Arthur a dollar." She knew that dollar was going to help pay the fiddler and how she hated the idea - for the devil was in the violin (a nice old-time Methodist idea). Grandpa was very calm abut it and finally got her sort of mollified.

Now don't get me wrong! I think Grandma Larson was a very fine person, a wonderful wife and mother, and a wonderful grandmother to me. I salute her memory and I know she did much for me that three winters I stayed with them to go to school. There was no school within 10 miles of where my father's ranch was.

As I said, he was a very religious man, but his religion was real. I remember going with him one time to the parsonage, along side the old weatherbeaten church, when he brought the preacher's mail. He took along bags of apples and potatoes from the Larson cellar under the granary in which were always stored a lot of food supplies. There were also barrels of cider which turned to vinegar. (George Owens and I used to go down there, take out the bugs and sip the sour stuff with straws. PHOOEY!)

Finally, one preacher was appointed for both Smith Valley and Antelope Valley. He lived in Smith Valley but came to Antelope Valley every few weeks to preach, and always stayed at the Larson's. Sometimes staying two or three days as I remember. I think aunts Eva and Tessa used to get a little fed-up with that,m for the very best was always coming from the kitchen with our grandparents approval and insistence. One time they were going to have communion at the church and it devolved on the women at the house to provide the bread and wine (non-alcoholic, of course). After much soul-searching, a nice red liquid was produced which I think was made from currant jelly, or possibly canned berries. Grandmother had the preacher taste it to see if it would do. He smacked his lips and pronounced it excellent. So that hurdle was taken in stride.

Grandfather Larson was a hospitable man, and people were always welcome at his table. He always said grace before each meal. When the preacher was there he returned thanks at Grandfather's invitation. Then there was singing and long, long prayers in the evening. (Sort of cramped the style of a certain lively 8 or 9 year old boy).

One afternoon I was attempting to fly my kite, but the winds were variable and fickle. I said lots of things out real loud - for I was mad! When I finally gave up, I saw the preacher had been taking it all in, and later he said to me quite meaningfully, "You had a hard time with your kite today, didn't you!" I sheepishly agreed that I had, and then trembled in my shoes for fear he would tell Grandfather about all the bad words I had said. But if he did, Grandpa never said anything to me about it. As you can see, the preacher was a pain in the neck to me. I remember one time the preacher called a class meeting after church in which various people got up and gave testimonies. I was horrified to have Grandmother Larson (the saint that she really was) stand up and declare herself a sinner. I didn't believe then that she was a sinner, and I don't to this day, either.

Grandfather was superintendent of the Sunday School and we all drove to church every Sunday even when there was no preacher in attendance. He always called the meeting to order by banging on the old wood burning stove with the iron poker. Then with a benign smile, he would invite everyone to take their places. Grandmother taught the class I was in and she had a busy time making each of us memorize a verse from the Bible to recite. The shortest verse of all in the King James version is "Jesus wept." That was a very popular verse with some of the boys. Grandfather led in the singing of the hymns, and as I recall, he had a very good singing voice.

I never knew him to make any display of affection - even toward Grandmother - although I am sure that they were happily married. Neither did I ever see him really angry at any one. The nearest that I can recall was toward me. If you will excuse the language, I'll tell you just how it happened. He and I were in a corral back of the barn with a young calf that was about a month old. This calf was supposed to go through a certain gate opening. The calf had other ideas. But after much maneuvering, Grandfather on one side and me on the other, the calf was almost to the gate. Then he balked and tried to run past Grandfather who stopped him. Next he bolted toward me and I always timid (and really a chump) jumped out of the way and let Mr. Calf go by. Grandfather just looked at me in scorn and said "Oh, Shit." I don't know which hurt me worse - the fact I had been such a ninny, or that he had said such a thing, and out loud too!

One other time, Uncle Will Owens was visiting there and was smoking his

after-supper cigar out in the yard, where all the men had gathered. He laid his half-smoked cigar on the top rail of the fence to engage in some acrobatics with the others. It finally got dark, and he forgot the cigar and went inside. But you bet I didn't forget it! Out early next morning I grabbed some matches, retrieved the cigar, and lit up big as life out back of the barn. Just then who should appear along side of me but your father, my uncle Owen (of whom I was always a little secretly afraid.) I dropped the cigar, but he picked it up and marched into the house with the incriminating evidence. After a long walk down in the field, I returned to the house and while washing my face in the wash room, I heard through the thin wall to the kitchen, Aunts Eva and Tessa, discussing the fact that "Owen caught him smoking a cigar out back of the barn." I thought sure that I would catch heck, for I was sure that Grandfather was told about it. But I never heard a word more about it. That was the kind of a man he was. He just let me stew in my own iniquity, and I know that method was very effective.

Of course you know the story of him and Mr. Connell carrying that pole and the U.S. flag to the top of Centennial Mountain in 1876, and raising the flag with appropriate ceremony. I was told of it many times and when we went west in 1955, I was by there and saw the pole still standing. Also the monument and plaque Uncle Vic had put up to commemorate the event. Very fine of Uncle Vic too.

Grandfather was a member of the School Board of the middle district where I went to school. In fact, he was probably the chairman. I remember on a Washington birthday anniversary, there was a new flag pole set on the school grounds and a new flag was raised to the accompaniment of us singing patriotic songs and a speech by somebody. Just as the proceedings started, Grandfather Larson appeared to my great amazement and embarrassment. I just couldn't see why he should be there. Well, getting older, I knew that he was there because he revered our flag and was proud that he was an American citizen. He left his work and tramped two miles to be part of that event. He was the only one who came. Proud of him! You bet I am. He was a wonderfully good man and I am thankful he was my grandfather.

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FROM MONO COUNTY TO INYO COUNTY

Tom Rickey froze out the Wood Larson water rights on the West Walker River by going above their land ownership and filing new claims with the Forest Service. This was disastrous to Wood Larson's ranching, so when he heard of the lush land of Owens Valley, he came down to see if they had better move to Inyo County. He bought a 160 acre homestead from Joseph Shelley, part of which is now a golf course two miles south of Bishop.

It had been some 30 years since he had seen his sister Anneta Best, and so before moving to Inyo he took his wife and two daughters, Tessa and Eva, by team and wagon on a trip to Oregon to see her. On the way back along the Davis Creek roadway, the team took fright and ran away, overturning the wagon. Janey was thrown out and had a broken arm, Tessa was injured. Eva was not with them since she had stayed in Oregon where she was going to marry one of Annetta's grandsons, a Rinehart.

How they proceeded on the journey I don't know. The team was quieted and the wagon was not severely damaged. So they continued their journey southward. Their plan was to stop in Bodie before completing their trip to Bishop. It was there in the lodging house of Araminta Jane Owens that Wood had a stroke of apoplexy, and he never made it to Bishop.

Janey telegraphed her oldest son of the tragedy that had overtaken them in Bodie. Owen and Vic were ready to file for homesteads in the Okanogan Valley in Northern Washington. Owen immediately returned to help his mother. He bought the NW 40 acres of the 160 from his mother, and began to clear the land for farming.

With slip shovel and grub hoe the 40 acres were slowly put under cultivation and became a highly productive dairy farm 2 1/2 miles south of Bishop. It was farmed for 25 years before the land was sold to Department of Water and Power of the city of Los Angeles. The end of the drama came fast in the 1920's.

"Twilight and Evening Star
After that the dark."
Tennyson-

At Journey's end
where lovers part . . .

The doctor was there in Araminta's house in Bodie. Wood had suffered a heavy stroke. Janey was sobbing uncontrollably as the doctor said, "There is no hope." She stood against the door frame for support. Wood's last words were, "don't cry, so, Janey, I'll be alright."

EPILOGUE
LARSON WAY
Highway 395, 1964 - 1990

In the early 1950's Connell and Vic Larson placed a Highway marker commemorating the centennial of America. Larson, Connell and the Cold brothers raised a flag on a locust pole carried by Wood Larson on July 4, 1876.

On July 4, 1976 at a Larson reunion in Coleville, Robert Wood Larson III again raised a flag on what is known now as Centennial Hill. At Coleville, across the highway, is "Larson Lane" which leads eastward to the land where the Wood Larsons farmed. This acreage now is cut up into small parcels.

The Wood Larson's large 2 story farmhouse was built by Eggleston of lumber from Mill Creek. It was demolished by Chichester in the early 1970's. The owner was restoring the Rickey bunk house where the cowboys stayed. In the course of restoration, fire broke out and destroyed the building. The large barn built by Larson in 1898 still stands.

Excerpts from a letter written by V.H. Larson to Elmer G. Wiley
Dated December 9, 1951

I made a trip to Nevada and also out to Antelope Valley during September and October. I went to Antelope for the special purpose to inspect a bronze plaque that my old friend Virgil Connell and I had had cast at a bronze smelter and engaged Telge Hardy to mount on a monument near the base of Centennial Hill commemorating the 75th year of the placing of the pole and raising of the flag there on July the Fourth, 1876, by John Connell, the Cole Boys and Wood Larson.

The trip to Antelope brought many memories of long ago including the year 1882 when the following families after selling out to Rickey were migrating in covered wagons to Oregon. Joe Wiley family, Bill Wiley family, Cochrane family, Charlie Carney family and 5 or 6 single men.

Mattie Wiley, (Bill Wiley's wife) was a special warm friend of mother's and as mother was anxious to visit Grandfather Owens in Washoe Valley. It was arranged for us to accompany them on their way. Father had the hard wood bows and stirrups bolted to a spring wagon and then covered with canvas. As the caravan started mother, Owen and I joined the outfit. Bill Wiley had two wagons, the Cochranes had two, and the rest had one. Some men rode horses. The first day out, getting a late start, we camped on a meadow near Alkali Lake now Topaz Lake.

I well remember all the camp fires that night. We trailed the wagons the next day until we arrived at the Cradelbaugh toll bridge where the wagons came to a halt. Both mother and Mattie Wiley shed tears as they said Good bye. From there we drove ahead and reached Franktown early that evening.

I shall try and copy a little poem that I have also written of the Celebration that year as both Virgil and I recall the events on that occasion. Two miners with a box of dynamite were stationed near the base of Centennial Hill, and were setting off constant blasts. There was constructed a long green willow shed with tables and benches around for protection from the sun, and a speakers platform. I recall all this, and the Indians who had left their tepees to see what it was all about. They were invited to eat after the whites were through. I conjectured of course what line of thought the speaker made in his address.

-- Your Uncle Vic.

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Ninety years after Wood Larson's death in Bodie, Chalfant Press is now publishing excerpts from the early days. Once recent volume had Wood Larson's photograph on the cover.

Wood Larson's wife contributed a stained glass window with his name inscribed in the First Methodist Church in Bishop in 1908. This church still stands with the window, bearing his name. His other memorial is a headstone in the cemetery in Bodie where he is buried.

Fedelia Larson, Wood's sister, is buried at Lakeview, Washoe County, Nevada. She had been murdered, apparently by her husband, Norton. She left one child - Eddie Norton, said by Victor Larson to have been "no good."